

The last word

Global anxieties, practical analyses

by the Editors

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"Think globally, act locally" — 90s activist slogan

"What is called globalization is really another name for the dominant role of the United States." — Henry Kissinger, 1999

At the turn of the century, we live with two extreme conditions. On the one hand, an increasingly globalized economy bridged by transnational conglomerates dominates not only raw materials, manufacturing, and goods, but also finance, services, and culture with a technologically expanded communication system. On the other hand, an increasing gap between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, capital and labor, urban cosmopolitan core and rural periphery widens with no end in sight. We witness the increasing dislocation and deterioration of the physical and biological environment and capitalism's relentless change of the social structures closest to everyday life while pundits and "dot.com" commercials assure us that every day in every way we are all prospering.

The resulting anxieties have spawned obvious reactions: religious fundamentalisms, narrow nationalisms, imperial arrogance, and belligerent individualism in everything from transportation to communication. Expanded communication in the U.S. seems to mean every suburbanite's using their cell phone while driving an SUV to the mall. Against this backdrop, recent political events in our own domain allow for a qualified optimism. The Seattle and Washington DC protests against the World Trade Organization, the massive stand against neoliberal plans to take over Pacifica radio in Berkeley, another wave of faculty and teaching assistant organizing, and campus activity against college apparel sweatshops show that the spark of resistance still exists and some effective organizing is possible.

Analysis and activism in the U.S. remain beleaguered by old quarrels and old attitudes that keep potential partners from coming together in a common cause. While the wave of "direct action" tactics and energy around the WTO was refreshing and imaginative, it has to be said that some of it was self-indulgent and

counterproductive. As always, the call for grass roots spontaneism conjures up visions of organic revolution and self-purifying radicalism, but it leaves strategic thinking elsewhere.

On the strategic front, at least in terms of media, there seems to be a new broader interest and understanding. Thirty years ago political economist Dallas Smythe was a voice in the wilderness when he wrote a landmark essay, "Communications — Blindspot of Western Marxism." In this essay he argued persuasively that the focus on the state and capitalism in Marxist thought failed to deal with the increasingly important role of communications in securing capitalist control. Today we can welcome a greater attention to communications on the left as evidenced in a series of notable special issues of *The Nation* on media industries and even some recognition of the issues by the stolid Old Left publication, *The Monthly Review*. And a recent series of publications by left academics, deliberately written for more than a narrow specialist audience, have joined the public discussion in a significant way, adding to the stalwart critiques of news journalism long produced by Edward S. Herman, Noam Chomsky, and others. Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* remains a classic.

A notable example of new work is Patricia Aufderheide's *The Daily Planet: A Critic on the Capitalist Culture Beat*, which collects essays on popular culture, children's educational TV, new Latin American cinema, grassroots media making, media literacy, and her always astute analyses of public policy communications issues. Similarly, Robert McChesney's recent *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* marks another significant attempt to provide a broad economic and institutional media analysis to a wider audience; he has been involved in some of *The Nation*'s special issues as well as the *Monthly Review*'s new attention to the field.

In the past, much of the best known work in political economy of communications used what amounted to a hectoring style of debate to score points rather than inviting readers into analysis. Thus the late Herb Schiller in *Information Inequality* denounced in a facile way the genres of music video and Hollywood action films, which left behind a younger generation of students, who have a much more sophisticated analysis of these genres and would then simply dismiss Schiller's whole argument. Fortunately, there is a genuine political economy analysis of music video in Jack Banks' *Monopoly Television: MTV's Quest to Control the Music* as well as a rich array of cultural studies analyses using gender and race as key terms of investigation.

Some new work, more traditionally academic than "trade book" in orientation, may mark a decisive turn in rigorous institutional analysis of media. John Downing's *Internationalizing Media Theory: Transition, Power, Culture* uses specific cases of transition in the Soviet Union/Russia, Poland, and Hungary from 1980-1995 to argue for a newer, deeper, and richer understanding of media than the current dominant or critical paradigms now offer. He argues for a significant paradigm shift to account for the cultural dimension of economic and political transformation, in particular for a recognition of the importance of symbolic and

emotional agents of mediated communication, and he calls for a close understanding of interpersonal communications by political economists. Similarly, Vincent Mosco's *The Political Economy of Communications*, a masterful summary of the academic tradition of the past 50 years, concludes with a respectful if still not enthusiastic look at the "border," as he calls it, between political economy and cultural studies.

Cultural studies, while frequently bashed by conservative intellectuals and academics, has also often been attacked by some old-fashioned leftists for embracing cultural consumption and identity politics rather than lining up with trade unions and the Democratic Party (philosopher Richard Rorty's charge) or denying class politics as the fulcrum of revolutionary change (the *Monthly Review* crowd's complaint). But cultural studies has much more diversity than its critics admit, and the field has changed and is changing. It is no accident that some of those associated with cultural studies have also been at the forefront of new initiatives for union organizing on campus and for giving graduate students more power in professional organizations. In this regard, Michael Bérubé's *Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* is a good example, as well as his anthology co-edited with Cary Nelson, *Higher Education under Fire: Politics, Economics, and the Crisis of the Humanities*.

Some of the gap between economic and cultural analysis lies in the training of intellectuals. Disciplines separate considering culture as a social and political phenomenon within an institutional framework from considering it as an expressive and individual phenomenon within an artistic framework. A division between social science models and humanities and creative practice ones deeply marks media studies in terms of attitudes, accepted procedures, and goals. But this variety is also the greatest strength of the field of media studies and has allowed at its best for the creative interaction of media makers, activists, and academics in a common cause.

Theory and practice can be brought together in exciting ways. A good case in point is B. Ruby Rich's *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*, in which the author reflects on films and artists through the lens of her own personal history and institutional involvement in the media art world. By concentrating on grassroots and activist media, some recent studies bring both an enthusiasm for this and a thoughtful critique of the media produced, as in Patricia Zimmerman's *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies* and Alexandra Juhasz' *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video*. Rigorous historical studies of past activism also enrich the discussion, such as Deirdre Boyle's *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*, and Chon Noriega's *Shot in America: Television, the State and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*. Other recent radical studies take on mainstream forms with a powerful combination of institutional and textual analysis such as Jane M. Shattuc's *The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women*, and Linda Kintz and (JUMP CUT co-editor) Julia Lesage's *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*.

Some might scoff at this critical production and argue that academics and

intellectuals always write books and do so to avoid getting into the streets where the action is. But that is to miss the point — that "spontaneous" activism without strategic perspective, without knowledge of what worked and failed in the past and why, without accurate understanding of the big picture can result in emotionally powerful but basically unsuccessful action, which in turn leads to defeat, despair, cynicism, burn-out, and retreat. At the height of radical activism in the 1960s when a vast wave of radical media work was being done, there was very little knowledge to guide the Movement. McCarthyism severed ties to past radical movements and individuals, and activists' critiques of "the system" were passionate but often fairly shallow. Activism today can draw on a rich heritage and thoughtful perspectives drawn from past practice.

Further, teaching itself is a form of political practice, and it is obvious that many media teachers do develop the tools of radical analysis in the classroom. Two new textbooks show the results: Mike Budd, Steve Craig, and Clay Steinman's *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture*, and Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella, and D. Charles Whitney's *Media Making: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*. Both use cultural and economic/institutional analyses to develop their discussions. Furthermore, within the Society for Cinema Studies there's a new initiative for working with K-12 teachers on media literacy issues. Demonstrating the effectiveness of this kind of work, at a recent Console-ing Passions TV conference Henry Jenkins discussed his community involvement in countering the moral panic against children and media. This is especially important following the Littleton massacre and the resulting Congressional and pundit attack on an adolescent culture of popular music, the Internet, video games, and teen movies. Working from his cultural studies background and scholarly work on how audiences actually use popular culture texts, Jenkins can refute right wing and mainstream attacks on youth cultures.

Media politics play a central role in globalized capitalism; advancing a progressive position demands a rich, multi-leveled, multi-phased understanding of media and change. At this point in history, capitalism continues to consolidate its power, but a rigorous and powerful critique of media globalization has also grown and provides an important tool for change.